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### H. Clay Gorton, *The Legacy of the Brass Plates of Laban: A Comparison of Biblical and Book of Mormon Isaiah Texts*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *The Legacy of the Brass Plates of Laban: A Comparison of Biblical and Book of Mormon Isaiah Texts* (1994), by H. Clay Gorton.

**H. Clay Gorton. *The Legacy of the Brass Plates of Laban: A Comparison of Biblical and Book of Mormon Isaiah Texts*. Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1994. 298 pp., with appendix, bibliography, and subject index. \$18.98.**

Reviewed by Mark J. Johnson

In *The Legacy of the Brass Plates of Laban*, H. Clay Gorton sets out to show that the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon is a better translation by comparing it with earlier Isaiah sources. The introduction sets forth the purpose of the book: "each difference between the Book of Mormon Isaiah and the King James Version Isaiah will be identified and noted. In addition, these differences will be compared with the wording of the Isaiah chapters in three other versions of the Old Testament" (p. 11). Gorton accomplishes this by providing a verse-by-verse comparison with other, older Isaiah texts. He uses translations of the Latin Vulgate, the Greek Septuagint, and the Spanish Salamanca Bible, which is *believed* to be a later translation of the older Masoretic Hebrew version.

Before he begins the point-by-point comparisons, Gorton provides us with 82 pages of introductory material and historical background. He includes sections on the problems of translation, possible motives for removal of material from the Isaiah texts, and chiastic comparisons between the Book of Mormon Isaiah and the King James Isaiah. These sections are informative, with background for the thesis of the book, yet are also filled with speculation on Gorton's part.

The course of this review will be accomplished in four sections. First, I will discuss the texts which are compared to the Book of Mormon text and whether they are appropriate for comparison. Second, I will address the comparisons made by Gorton and his

views on the comparisons' significance, and conclude whether these comparisons enhance our understanding of the Book of Mormon. Third, I will detail some of the chiasmic parallels as outlined by Gorton. Lastly, I will address the completeness of the book and how it could have been improved.

## Translated Correctly?

In addition to reproducing the Spanish text of the Salamanca Bible (a distraction for those not fluent in Spanish), he provides an English translation of the Spanish text as well. What perhaps may be viewed as a bias on Gorton's part is his couching of the English translation of the Salamanca Bible in the vernacular of the Book of Mormon. Here, obvious differences are emphasized while small differences in transmission from the Hebrew into the Spanish and then into the English might be overlooked. Although Gorton should be given credit for including what is believed to be a translation of the Masoretic Hebrew, perhaps a better source could be found.

Gorton further asserts that his translation of the Salamanca Bible into English was done after the same manner that Joseph Smith followed in his translation of the Isaiah chapters. Although Gorton has support for his views of the methods of the translation<sup>1</sup> (that Joseph acknowledged that the Book of Mormon Isaiah was close enough to the King James Isaiah, and so simply lifted the King James texts to the Book of Mormon),<sup>2</sup> all we are told is that the translation was done by "gift and power of God." Was this the method used by Gorton?

Further, this theory that is adapted by Gorton seems to conflict with the premise of the rest of *Legacy*, that the Isaiah texts contained on the brass plates of Laban were not corrupted by uninspired translators, which is the flaw with the King James Isaiah

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<sup>1</sup> Gorton cites B. H. Roberts and Sidney Sperry in his bibliography (p. 249).

<sup>2</sup> Gorton summarizes his argument on page 31 of *Legacy*. He writes: "Although no firsthand account exists of Joseph Smith's employment of the King James text in translating the Isaiah chapters, it is obvious he used the King James Bible as the basis for his terminology in translating the Isaiah chapters." He goes on to say that when differences existed, Joseph followed the King James wording.

texts. It does not make sense to say that the Book of Mormon borrowed most of its language from the King James Version, and then to praise the Book of Mormon for its antiquity and purity.

The Book of Mormon variants contain many minor differences compared to the text of the King James Version (i.e., many differences are merely an addition of an *and* or a switch from a *that* to a *when* in the verse), and one is forced to ask why Joseph made such small changes at all. Basically, the theory is that Joseph used the texts of the King James Version to ease the burden of translation *except* when the two texts actually differed. In other words, Joseph used the King James Version when it matched the brass plates version. But if a match occurs, why not continue to use the original brass plates version instead of having to switch from one source to another, even though the texts are the same? Either way, the Prophet would have ended up with the same message.

In addition, many of the smallest changes (especially in 1 and 2 Nephi) are very close together. In order to note and correct so many small differences, Joseph would have had to make a detailed line-by-line study of the two different versions. A comparison of both the brass plates and the King James Version would require intense scrutiny. Surely, such an intensive process would not relieve the Prophet from the difficulties of translation. In fact, translation should not be an easy process, but rather one that needs to be pondered and studied (D&C 8:2).

Concerning this, John Tvedtnes writes, "The explanation most often given . . . is that the prophet Joseph Smith, while translating the plates, decided to put the Biblical passages into the King James language because it was the Bible most commonly used by his contemporaries."<sup>3</sup> While it is possible that Joseph adapted the King James Version vernacular, the numerous changes do not justify regarding whole sections of the King James Isaiah as the source of the Book of Mormon text. All we can be sure about the translation is that the language used is approved of by the Lord (D&C 17:6).

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<sup>3</sup> John A Tvedtnes, "The Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1981), 1.

## Pass the Sifter

While outlining many significant changes, Gorton also makes us wade through large quantities of material with inconsequential changes. He affirms on page 66 that 233 differences exist between the Isaiah material in the King James Version and the Book of Mormon that are stylistic and have little (if any) effect on the meaning of the verse. Yet, despite the relative unimportance of these minor details, he guides us through them anyway. The reader is forced to weed out the wheat from the tares and find the passages in which differences are significant in the midst of the surrounding filler. Thoroughness is not necessarily a good thing.

The verses that do not contain differences are identified by their verse number and "No Change," and then the verse is listed anyway. Verses that contain minor changes are labeled "Stylistic Change Only," and all the different translations are listed, often without commentary. Once the reader has overlooked all the gnats this book strains at, he or she can gain some valuable insight into the differences in the Book of Mormon Isaiah passages.

Gorton's analysis of 2 Nephi 12 and Isaiah 2 is thorough and thoughtful. For example, in 2 Nephi 12:5, he notes the elimination of the phrase "yea, come, for ye have all gone astray, every one to his wicked ways" in all other variants beside the Book of Mormon. Instead of trying to explain the change by a technical, scribal oversight, he emphasizes the spiritual aspect, that it was a deliberate omission by a wicked priest or scribe. Most of the analysis by Gorton throughout the book deals with the losses from this attitude, that wicked men eliminated Israel's condemnation and created the appearance that "all is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well" (2 Nephi 28:21).

This approach toward the different variants is very refreshing and makes Gorton's book worthwhile. I feel this approach is also in harmony with the message of the Book of Mormon on the elimination of the words of God. Nephi, the foremost expert on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, never mentions that the words of the Lamb would be lost due to a scribal gloss, but rather emphasizes the words which were eliminated at the hand of the "great and abominable church" (cf. 1 Nephi 13:34). Nephi, I feel, would have approved the results achieved by Gorton.

The most impressive examples of things that were deliberately removed are contained in a separate section called "The Influence of Apostate Israel." This chapter is excellent and is the crowning feature of the book. Anyone who is serious about the study of the Isaiah variants should consider this section with great care.

## Writing Blind?

A major point in *Legacy* is that the numerous chiasmic structures in the scriptures were the result of inspiration and not planning on behalf of the scriptural writers. Indeed, this is quite a claim. The Book of Mormon does contain elements of chiasmus which appear to be crafted and manipulated by its authors. Nephi, the son of Lehi, often uses quotations in his writings and builds chiasms around them. Most notable is Nephi's quotation of Isaiah 29:6-24 in 2 Nephi 27:2-35. This chapter (which is not covered in *Legacy*) begins with a chiasm which spans both Nephi's introduction (2 Nephi 26:33-27:1-2) and the first few verses of the quotation of Isaiah 29 (2 Nephi 27:3-5). Here we find Nephi building a larger chiasm out of a small one. It seems most likely that Nephi was fully aware of chiasmus as he produced his record.

It should be noted that many ancient writings that are not of a scriptural nature are also chiasmic. If chiasmic structured messages were used exclusively by the Lord, then chiasmus should not appear in other sources. Yet chiasmus has been found in such broad sources as the writings of Homer, Sumero-Akkadian contracts,<sup>4</sup> and the Mayan Popul Vuh.<sup>5</sup> The presence of chiasmus in ancient writings does not guarantee it to be inspired scripture.

Probably the best example of the paradox that Gorton tries to establish is the Song of Solomon. This short book contains almost thirty chiasms,<sup>6</sup> many of which are too large in element and span to be accidental. Yet the manuscripts of the Joseph Smith Transla-

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<sup>4</sup> Robert F. Smith, "Chiasmus in Sumero-Akkadian," in Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Allen J. Christenson, "The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient Maya-Quiche," *Latin American Literatures Journal* 4/2 (Fall 1988): 125-50.

<sup>6</sup> Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 336.

tion declare the Song of Solomon to be “not inspired.”<sup>7</sup> If chiasmus is a sign of inspired writing, the Prophet erred in denouncing the Song of Solomon. A more likely reason that the Song of Solomon contains chiasmus is that chiasmus was taught as a literary device throughout Jewish history.

## How the Grinch Stole Chiasmus<sup>8</sup>

A better use of the study of chiasmus in ancient texts should be to demonstrate completeness rather than inspiration. The book of Revelation, for example, is structured in chiastic form to help insure that the text is not added to, or taken away from (Revelation 22:18–19). Texts structured in chiastic form will betray any tampering from an outside source. Once chiasmus is understood, scriptural texts can be analyzed along chiastic lines. If the chiasm is incomplete or largely unbalanced, then it would indicate that “plain and precious parts” were removed from the author’s original message by the “great and abominable church.”

An example of using chiasmus to indicate completeness may be found in an analysis of Revelation 12:1–4. While the rest of the chapter has been found to be chiastic by Nils Lund,<sup>9</sup> these first four verses betray no chiastic characteristics. The Joseph Smith Translation, however, rearranges these verses into a tight chiasm. I have arranged verses 1–4 of JST Revelation 12 with Joseph’s changes in italics.

A And there appeared  
     a great *sign*  
         in heaven,  
 in the likeness  
     of the things  
         on the earth;

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<sup>7</sup> For more detail see Robert J. Matthews, *A Plainer Translation: Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1994), 198.

<sup>8</sup> The *Grinch* is just a shortened form of the *great and abominable church*. It is hard enough to write it over and over in my notes, let alone spell it.

<sup>9</sup> Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 398–99.



- B a woman clothed  
with the sun,  
and the moon  
under her feet,  
and upon her head  
a crown of twelve stars.
- C And *the woman* being with child,  
cried, travailing in birth,  
and pained to be delivered.  
*And she brought forth a man child,*
- D *who was to rule*  
*all nations with a rod of iron;*  
*and her child was caught up unto God*  
*and his throne.*
- C' *And there appeared*  
*another sign in heaven;*  
*and behold,*  
*a great red dragon,*
- B' *having seven heads*  
*and ten horns,*  
*and seven crowns*  
*upon his heads.*
- A' *And his tail drew*  
*the third part*  
*of the stars of heaven,*  
*and did cast*  
*them*  
*to the earth.* (JST Revelation 12:1–4)

Or in other words,

- A Heaven and Earth  
B Heads and Crowns

- C Birth of the Child
- D Role of the Child
- C' Appearance of the Dragon
- B' Heads and Crowns
- A' Heaven and Earth

The restoration of chiasmus points to a restoration of the original text. Because this chiasm is an exact fit within the rest of the chapter, it shows that this is how John the Revelator scribed the revelation and that it was manipulated by a later detractor.

Gorton does acknowledge that "degradation [of chiasmus] would occur as concepts were changed from the original" (p. 53). He declares, without evidence, that inspired chiasmus would degrade in various translations over the years, while a conscious use of chiasmus as a literary style would not. Such a claim is unfounded and too much to expect the reader to believe.

Gorton cites his book *Language of the Lord*<sup>10</sup> as evidence to introduce his claim that chiasmus is exclusively an inspired form. He also claims that "it is the opinion of many scholars, . . . that the chiasmus is an inspired form." He claims many sources, but none are cited. Research on the subject of chiasmus in the Doctrine and Covenants was completed some twenty years earlier by Charles Kroupa and Richard Shipp.<sup>11</sup> Shipp and Kroupa also come to the conclusion that chiasmus is "a creation of the Divine Mind."<sup>12</sup> But while the revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith do contain numerous chiasms, as do other revelations of the early Church leaders,<sup>13</sup> it does not prove that the ancient chiasmic structures are exclusively the result of inspiration.

Although chiasmus in modern scripture might indicate inspiration from the Lord,<sup>14</sup> its presence anciently only indicates literary prowess among the ancients.

<sup>10</sup> H. Clay Gorton, *Language of the Lord* (Bountiful: Horizon, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Charles G. Kroupa and Richard C. Shipp, *From the Mind of God* (Salt Lake City: Shipp, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Kroup and Shipp, *From the Mind of God*, 8, 18–19, chart D&C 136:20–26 (a revelation given to Brigham Young) as chiasmic. I find that chiasmus also exists in the writings of Joseph F. Smith (D&C 138:5–28).

<sup>14</sup> It may be that the high level of chiasmus in the Doctrine and Covenants derives from the simple fact that it was the style of the Jews. Jesus used

**“Make no claim of completeness”<sup>15</sup>**

H. Clay Gorton should be praised for his comparison of the Isaiah texts in the Book of Mormon to other ancient sources. Unfortunately, however, this book often disregards other Isaiah quotes in the Book of Mormon. One of the most profound changes in the Isaiah texts in the Book of Mormon occurs in its version of Isaiah 29. The Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 27), in quoting Isaiah 29, is not only different from the King James Version, but considerably different from the Joseph Smith Translation as well.

Isaiah 11 is quoted in 2 Nephi 21 and partially quoted (Isaiah 11:4–9) in 2 Nephi 30:9–15. Isaiah 12 is quoted in 2 Nephi 22. Both Isaiah 11 and 12 are somehow overlooked by Gorton.

In many places in the Book of Mormon the same Isaiah text is quoted differently in different discourses. Isaiah 9:12–13 is quoted in 2 Nephi 19:12–13, and later paraphrased in 2 Nephi 28:32. A side-by-side comparison of these different verses, along with a comparison to the early Hebrew and Greek, would assuredly shed new light on the Isaiah texts in the Book of Mormon.

Further, his calculations of chiasms that are shared by the King James and the Book of Mormon Isaiah texts are a little short. While he records that ten are common to both texts, I have noted close to thirty.

## **Conclusion**

While *Legacy* contains a lot of speculation by the author, it is valuable for its commentary on the spiritual nature of the losses of the Isaiah texts. If the reader desires a good grasp of the changes in the Isaiah texts, a side-by-side study of Gorton's *Legacy* and Tvedtnes's "Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon" should be most beneficial. Together, these two achieve a good balance of technical and spiritual.

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chiasmus in his discourse while he was mortal (see Matthew 13:13–18). It seems likely that what he learned here on earth would be carried with him beyond the veil (D&C 130:18).

<sup>15</sup> Gorton, *Language of the Lord*, 3.